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ABSTRACT

By examining two autobiographies by Victorian women, the role of editors in the composing and publishing of autobiographical texts can be explored, and questions can be raised about the way personal writing is assigned, edited, and evaluated in classrooms today. The autobiography of Margaret Oliphant, a prolific Victorian novelist and critic, was cut, pasted, and published after Oliphant's death by her niece, Mrs. Harry Coghill. Based on Coghill's editorial procedures, it appears that the content was edited to present a public version of Margaret Oliphant which conformed more fully to the idea of a good writer, good mother, and good woman. The autobiography of Elizabeth Davis, a working-class, single woman, as edited by Jane Williams, represents what the editor thought was appropriate writing for--and an appropriate self-presentation of--a working woman. The editor's position in relation to a Victorian woman's text is rather like the teacher's position in relation to personal writing done in the classroom. To what extent do teachers' comments on students' autobiographical writing reflect unstated cultural assumptions about gender? To what extent do textbooks identify "good" autobiographical writing with the features of one gender or another? To what extent should teachers/editors attempt to be gender-neutral? (SR)

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Linda H. Peterson

Session: F15, A Woman's Audience is (Almost) Never a Fiction
Time: Friday, March 23, 8:30-9:45 a.m.
Title (revised): Editing Women's Texts: Issues of Cultural Expectations in Editing and Evaluating Women's Writing

When Victorian women wrote, their audience was almost never a fiction--especially when they wrote autobiographical narratives. Unlike forms of "public" writing, many of which were off-limits to women, forms of personal writing were sanctioned by Victorian society in the shape of diaries, journals, domestic memoirs, and other feminine versions of autobiography. These forms of personal writing were almost always written for a real, known audience: the family, whether sons and daughters, grandchildren and other progeny, or other versions of the family unit. As it turns out, such personal writing was also **edited** by the same family members. Usually the editor was a son or daughter or, at farthest remove, a close family friend; preferably she was a woman. What I want to explore today is the role of such editors in the composing and publishing of autobiographical texts. This editoral practice created what we might today call a "community" of writers and readers, a term we consider largely positive. But I want to explore both the positive and negative aspects of such communities, ultimately to raise questions about the way we assign, edit, and evaluate personal writing in our classrooms today.

Let me begin with two Victorian examples: the well-known Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant, a prolific Victorian novelist and critic, and The Autobiography of Elizabeth Davis, an unknown Welshwoman who served as a nurse under Florence Nightengale in the Crimean War.[1] Margaret

[1]Mrs. M.O.W. Oliphant, The Autobiography, ed. Mrs. Harry Coghill (1899; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988) and The Autobiography of Elizabeth Davis, Betsy Cadwaladyr: A Balaclava Nurse, ed. Jane Williams [Ysgafell] (1857; rpt. Cardiff: Honno, 1987).

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Oliphant's personal narrative was originally intended for her children: her sons Cyril and Cecco, perhaps also her adopted nieces and nephew. When Oliphant began writing her autobiography, she emphasized family stories: stories of her own mother and brothers, anecdotes about the early days of her marriage, including details of her own and her husband's career, and especially memories of her life as a mother. She was writing a domestic memoir, in other words. During the course of the writing, however, her two sons died, and the original audience for her autobiography disappeared. She had instead to write for "the public." Oliphant notes the effect of this change on The Autobiography: "when I wrote it for my Cecco to read it was all very different, but now that I am doing it consciously for the public, with the aim . . . of leaving a little more money, I feel all this to be so vulgar, so common, so unnecessary, as if I were making pennyworths of myself" (75). Despite her distaste for the new task, she finished The Autobiography, telling more stories about authorship, "putting in anecdotes that will do to quote in the papers and make the book sell" (75).

Oliphant's **audience** thus shaped the content of her autobiography, with the shift from "family" to "public" being reflected in a shift from "domestic memoir" to "writer's autobiography"; the **editor** of her Autobiography shaped the account to an equal degree. At her death, Oliphant left the manuscript unsorted,[2] and it was her niece, Mrs. Harry Coghill, who cut, pasted, and finally published the document. We will not know the extent of Mrs. Coghill's editing until Elisabeth Jay completes a scholarly edition of Oliphant's Autobiography. But we do know some editorial procedures that Mrs. Coghill followed. For example, she made the account less associative,

[2]Actually, there were four main manuscripts, which Oliphant's niece combined in a more or less chronological sequence.

more sequential; she cut negative or indiscrete remarks about other writers; she suppressed some material about (presumably embarrassing) family matters; and she eliminated passages in which Oliphant cried out against providence, against a God who would take her children away and leave her alone. She edited the content, in other words, to present a public version of Margaret Oliphant who conformed more fully to her idea of a good writer, good mother, good woman. We would not have a published text of The Autobiography without Mrs. Coghill, but we also have a public persona shaped by an editor--and an editor's sense of "good" writing.

The case of Elizabeth Davis' Autobiography is different, in that we would have no autobiography at all without its editor, Jane Williams. Williams was a Victorian feminist whose advocacy of women focused on publishing women's writing--both in the sense of "making public" what women had achieved, as in her massive The Literary Women of England,[3] and more literally in the sense of "making books" by and about women. She created Elizabeth Davis' Autobiography by seeking Elizabeth Davis out, transcribing an oral version of Davis' history, and editing it for publication. She was a Victorian Studs Terkel, to oversimplify--though a Terkel with a personal commitment to portraying strong, capable, independent women.

What interests me about Jane Williams, as about Mrs. Coghill, is the way in which editing shapes--and is shaped by--a sense of feminine subjectivity. Williams' sense of Davis as an autobiographical subject is different from Coghill's of Oliphant--primarily because Davis was a

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[3]The Literary Women of England, Including a Biographical Epitome of All the Most Eminent to the Year 1700; and Sketches of the Poetesses to the Year 1850 (London: Saunders, Otley, 1861). This is a Victorian predecessor of books like Ellen Moers' Literary Women.

working-class and single woman, whereas Oliphant was solidly middle-class and married. Because of these differences, Williams seems to have imagined a different **form** for Davis' autobiography and a different **persona** for its subject. The account reads like a picaresque novel, like a Moll Flanders with a chaste heroine. Davis travels with employers to South America, she sails round the world, she meets up with convicts in Australia and opium-smokers in China, she nurses wounded soldiers in the Crimea--all the while fending off amorous liasons with all-too-randy men. She is Williams' version of a good working woman.

In saying this, I don't mean to suggest that Williams, as editor, either invented materials for the Autobiography or ignored materials that Davis provided orally (though the latter may have been the case). Rather, it seems that Williams edited according to her sense of "good" writing. We know that Williams wrote in "more polished prose" than Davis used, though she retained words when they were "apt and striking"; we know that she pieced together a "coherent narrative" from what she called Davis' "desultory and digressive manner"; and we know that she checked up on Davis' facts about the Crimean War to make sure they were accurate.[4] In other words, The Autobiography of Elizabeth Davis represents what the editor thought was appropriate writing for--and an appropriate self-presentation of--a working woman. The criteria for such appropriate writing include **style** (edited prose except for a few homely or colorful phrases), **form** (a sequential narrative rather than random anecdotes), and **content** (episodes about work, love, and sex--as befits the autobiographical subject's station in life).

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[4]Davis' modern editor, Deirdre Beddoe, discusses these editorial decisions that Jane Williams made in her introduction to the edition cited above, pp xiii-xic.

These criteria--or, rather, these categories--still operate today. What becomes apparent as one thinks about such historical examples is that the editor's position in relation to a Victorian woman's text is rather like the teacher's position in relation to personal writing done in the classroom. The editor/teacher is the agent that empowers the student to write, that provides an audience for the writer, that helps women students find a voice, that brings the text to fruition, that makes public and meaningful what was before only private and unformed: these are some of the positive functions that editors and teachers serve. Yet as editor of another woman's autobiography, or as commentator on a student's autobiographical essay, the editor/teacher also functions in more problematic ways. By editing or commenting, s/he may suggest alterations in the narrative structure, in the presentation of episodes or details, in the style or tone, in the autobiographical persona. These suggestions are requisite but problematic. They alter the writer's self.

In a recent article in CCC titled, "Judging Writing, Judging Selves," Lester Faigley points out that judgments about "good" writing often involve approval of the writer's persona--or "subjectivity," as it is now common to say. For example, when writing teachers selected examples of "good" writing for the collection What Makes Writing Good, they chose--in 75% of the cases--examples of the autobiographical essay; these examples and the teachers' commentaries about them show, according to Faigley, that in evaluating students' writing, teachers operate according to their own "unstated cultural definitions of the self."[5] Put more simply, that means

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[5]Lester Faigley, "Judging Writing, Judging Selves," CCC 40 (December 1989), 410.

that teachers like to see reflections of themselves in their students' autobiographical essays.

I think Faigley is onto something important. Faigley says only a little about gender, perhaps because his materials deal more overtly with issues of class. But in the remaining time, I'd like to raise some questions about gender as it affects us as teachers/editors of students' personal essays:

(1) To what extent do our comments on students' autobiographical writing reflect our "unstated cultural assumptions" about gender? Do we equate "good" writing with certain views of a "good" woman or a "good" man? In editing Margaret Oliphant's Autobiography, Mrs. Coghill--an adopted niece--was certainly mindful of presenting her aunt as a good mother even more than as a good writer; Victorian views of womanhood impinge upon the editing of the autobiographical manuscript. Our views of female goodness may be different, but are they equally operative? Do they affect our commentary on or evaluations of our students' work?

(2) To what extent do our textbooks identify "good" autobiographical writing with the features of one gender or another? I am struck by the fact that both Coghill and Williams felt compelled to edit their materials into chronologically-coherent sequences. No doubt this kind of editing must be done when a woman dies and leave her papers in disorder or when the editor is creating a written narrative from oral transcriptions. But this particular view of narrative order, some feminist critics would now say, was a Victorian male obsession. Do our textbooks have limited views of narrative form? Do they represent "masculine" preferences or allow for structures compatible with the experiences of both genders?

(3) To what extent should we, as teachers/editors, attempt to be gender-neutral? In transcribing and editing Elizabeth Davis' account, Jane

Williams was not being neutral: she was consciously presenting a capable, independent, and chaste woman to counter dominant Victorian views of women and, particularly, negative views of Welshwomen. It is easy for us to encourage, in other womens' writing, views of femaleness we admire. What do we do about autobiographical persona, male or female, we don't admire? Do we let all points of view have their say, striving for a politically open classroom, or do we encourage only views we think are well-informed and enlightened?

These are some of the pedagogical questions relating to gender that our profession needs to address.

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